

Incumbent Baltimore mayor wins Democratic primary

By SARAH BRUMFIELD, Associated Press
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BALTIMORE (AP) — Incumbent Stephanie Rawlings-Blake defeated five challengers in Baltimore's Democratic primary for mayor, a post she took over last year after her predecessor stepped down amid scandal.

After guiding the city through a series of crises ranging from snowstorms to budget gaps, Rawlings-Blake's victory on Tuesday makes her the heavy favorite to win the Nov. 8 general election, which is seen as a formality in a city where Republicans make up about 10 percent of the registered voters.

With 99 percent of precincts reporting, Rawlings-Blake had about 52 percent of the vote compared with her nearest challenger, state Sen. Catherine Pugh, who had 25 percent.

"I love my hometown," a beaming Rawlings-Blake said to supporters at her victory party. "We have all seen that Baltimore can go against the odds and win. We stand united behind a shared vision: better schools, safer streets and stronger neighborhoods."

Challengers to Rawlings-Blake had vowed to upset her if they could draw enough supporters to the voting booths, but turnout was light at 22 percent. Her challengers were former city planning director and mayoral chief of staff Otis Rolley, former Councilman Jody Landers, Circuit Court Clerk Frank Conaway and nurse Wilton Wilson.

Matthew Crenson, an emeritus professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, expected turnout to be low, but not that low. He blames a lack of interest in the race and a shift in voters' concerns to issues that are bigger than city politics, such as the economy and jobs.

"There's just no electricity. There might have been if two strong candidates emerged," said Crenson, who contributed to Rolley's campaign. "But also a lot of voters now have concerns that extend far outside the city."

The GOP primary, which featured Vicki Ann Harding and Alfred Griffin, was too close to call late Tuesday. The city hasn't had a Republican mayor since Theodore R. McKeldin left office in 1967.

Rawlings-Blake, the daughter of a popular state delegate, worked as a public defender and was the youngest person elected to the City Council at age 25 in 1995. She became Council president in 2007 and mayor last year when Democrat Sheila Dixon resigned after a conviction for embezzling gift cards for needy families and a separate plea for lying about gifts from her developer ex-boyfriend.

Dixon was to perform 500 hours of community service and contribute \$45,000 to charities in the city, but was allowed to keep a lifetime pension worth at least \$83,000 a year. She must serve at least two years of probation, but then she is free to run for office again.

Rawlings-Blake, 41, pushed for reforms to the city's ethics board when she came into office, part of the record she has touted during her race to win the seat in her own right. She also drew on support from the state's top Democrats, including Gov. Martin O'Malley and Rep. Elijah Cummings, who both turned up for her campaign launch and victory party.

Some questioned her readiness to lead the city at first, but as she smoothed out the turmoil, she won praise from many in the community. Opponents hoped that the mayor's support for the Baltimore Grand Prix would blow up in her face if it flopped, but so far the public reaction to the Labor Day event has been mostly positive.

In the 19 months she's been mayor, Rawlings-Blake said, there's been "one hurricane, one earthquake, a tornado and two blizzards ... two years of budget deficits. We are clear tonight, standing together as one city."

"She never gets off message," Crenson said. "She's always been prepared and not very spontaneous, which has worked for her."

Lutalo Bakari, 46, a registered Democrat who works as a social worker and track coach with city schools, said he voted for Rawlings-Blake because he likes what he has seen from her since she became mayor.

"Considering what she inherited, I think she's done a tremendous job," Bakari said. "She's doing the work that's needed."

But he didn't hear anything he liked from Rawlings-Blake's challengers and felt they focused too much on issues such as lowering property taxes.

"They made no case at all," he said.

Eve Gillison turned 18 on Tuesday, just in time to cast her first vote in the mayoral primary.

"It felt so powerful," she said. The high school senior, like her parents, Laura Gamble, 48, and Robert Gillison, 50, voted for Rolley.

The teenager said she supported Rolley because of the emphasis he put on improving education when she saw him speak. She has seen many schools in bad shape and understands that it is important for students to finish school just so they aren't behind.

"He's an exceedingly bright man," said Gamble, who had met him on a leadership group. "I wanted to vote for a candidate with ideas, not just the usual rhetoric."

She was sorry that the race didn't seem to gain much interest with voters.

"We've lived here for 20 years and this has been the quietest mayoral race in that time," Robert Gillison said. "I think it has more to do with the candidates than with the voters."